BARDWELL

Robert Louis Stevenson's Indebtedness to the 18th Century Novelists

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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON'S INDEBTEDNESS

TO THE

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NOVELISTS

By

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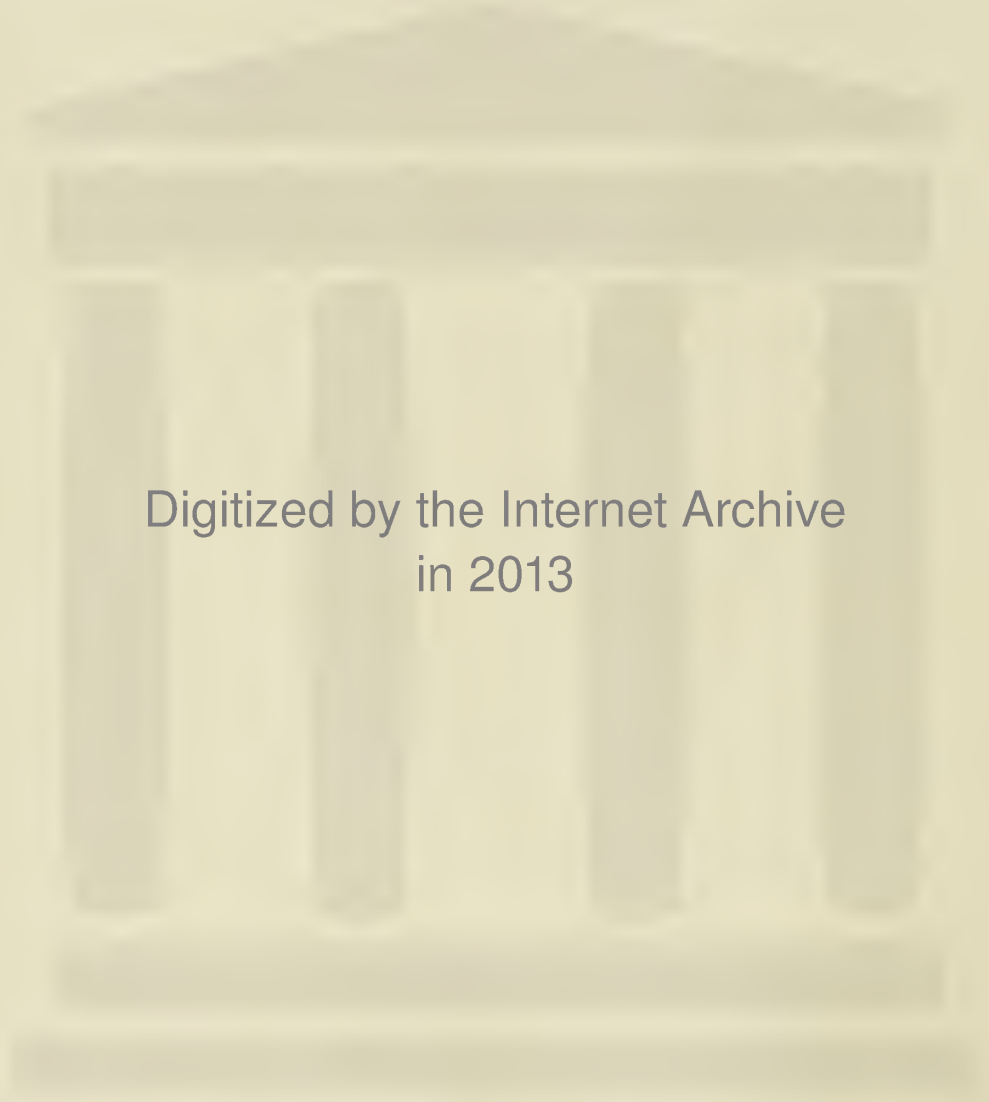

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Faith Leland Bardwell

ENTITLED Robert Louis Stevenson's Indebtedness to the Eighteenth Century Novelists

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF A. B.

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Stevenson's Indebtedness
to the
Eighteenth Century Novelists.

Critics of Stevenson have frequently recognized the fact that there exists in his work much that is suggestive of the eighteenth century novels & in the criticism which has been available to me I have found the following references to Stevenson's work in its relation to the eighteenth century.

Charles D. Lanier in an article in the Review of Reviews, V 11, 181, says that, when as a boy Stevenson accompanied his father on a coasting expedition about Skerryvore, he was "poring over Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving Poe, Cooper and Defoe." and he continues saying,

"Are not these parrots and these pirates, these stolen brigs and hidden treasure, these one-legged and one-eyed villains, these heroes

without even the weak hull, these very improbable tangles and quite impossible meanderings — are not these the old stage properties of Defoe, of Irving of Scott and a thousand lesser showmen?"

In the Living Age, 218; 240, J. A. MacCulloch simply states that Treasure Island is "comparable to Robinson Crusoe."

C. T. Copeland, Atlantic Monthly, 78; 575; in speaking of the horror of Dr Jekyll's discovery of his involuntary transformation, writes,

"There has not been such a shudder as that in our literature since Crusoe found the footprint in the sand."

Andrew Lang, in his essay on Stevenson, mentions his sense of the English idiom of the last last century.

The following is from an article in the Atlantic Monthly 62; 747 by Sophia Kirk:

"He (Stevenson) brings back old chivalries and piracies, and talks to the boyhood of today of shipwrecks and highwaymen as if these venerable objects of worship had not been superseded long ago by merchantile heroes and dollar coining newsboys."

Stevenson himself frankly acknowledges his indebtedness to the eighteenth century. In a letter to Marcel Schwob, the French man of letters, he writes,

"Ah yes, you are right, I love the eighteenth century and so do you, and have not listened to its voice in vain."

In the introduction to Treasure Island (page XII) he writes,

"No doubt the parrot once belonged to Robinson Crusoe. No doubt the skeleton is conveyed from Poe."

Again in the poem which

is preparatory to Treasure Island
it signifies his realization of
the fact that he has borrowed his
subject matter from the days
of buccaneer literature.

The actual comparison
of Stevenson work with that
of Defoe and Smollett reveals
many noticeable resemblances.
One of the strongest
similarities between Stevenson's
work and that of the eighteenth
century, is in its spirit, and the
character of the subject matter
treated. The extreme bloodiness
and brutality of Smollett and
Defoe are well toned by Stevenson.
They are made far more nearly
legitimate and much less
shocking, yet if we open our
eyes we cannot but see that
they are there still. The history
of the adventures on board
the Sarah, Master of Ballantrae

(p. 45-66) are certainly more artistic and entertaining than Defoe or Smollett were capable of writing, but there is no less horror there.

The circumstances leading up to the death of Goguelat (St. Ives pages 62-63) are better managed than any like affair in Smollett but never the less the brutality is heart sickening.

Other instances of this brutal horror may be found, Treasure Island page 193-201, page 35-4, page 100-107; St. Ives page 124-127 and Kidnapped page 76.

Stevenson delights in treating seafaring life and all the reckless adventure and cruelty which went with it in the days of the buccaneers. He is fond of desert islands, buried treasure and all the wild scenes and adventures which characterize the early novels. Indeed I think his subject matter is more closely analogous to that of the eighteenth century writers than

any recent novelists

Another characteristic of Stevenson which is like Smollett and Defoe is his didacticism. In Kidnapped, David Balfour, Master of Ballantrae and Treasure Island we feel this strongly. Certainly it is very different from the clumsy preaching and crude moralizing in Smollett, Defoe and Richardson. Stevenson seldom makes their common mistake of portraying evil so forcibly as to make it the most pervading element in the tone of the novel, indeed, his morals are so delicately drawn that there is almost always a question as to whether they are intentional or not. I have often heard readers contend that it was altogether unintentional, but we have from his own pen the expression of a desire to make his work a moral instrument. This is coupled with a complaint of the difficulties which beset

the path of the modern novelist who would preach. It is found in his Letters VI 342, and reads as follows:

"I have come for the moment to a pause in my moral works; for I have many irons in the fire, and I wish to finish something to bring coin before I can go on with what I think doubtfully to be a duty. It is a most difficult work; a touch of the parson will drive off those I hope to influence; a touch of overstrained laxity, besides disgusting like a grimmace, may do harm. Nothing that I have ever seen yet speaks directly and efficaciously to young men, and I do hope I may find the art to fill up a gap."

In spite of Stevenson's great superiority in the art of leading ethics and pointing to higher ideals, I feel that Defoe, Smollett, and Richardson might have

been to him an earnest of the fact that the novel could be used as a vehicle of ethical instruction

In the plot of Stevenson's David Balfour I found a resemblance to Smollett's Ferdinand Count Fathom. Renaldo's faithful charge of his orphaned love, Serafina, reminds one of Dandi's guardianship of the friendless Katriona, and there is a certain resemblance in the circumstances of the situation of the two pairs of lovers, especially in that both the unhappy maidens are kept prisoners in lonely out of the way houses. The pursuit by Renaldo and David Balfour (in kidnapped) of their rightful fortunes is something the same.

Often some situation or

incident in Stevenson stories. I remember another in an eighteenth century novel.

When David is wrecked upon the peninsular (Kidnapped page 181) we think of Robinson Crusoe's casting away. Apart from the mere circumstance the heroic efforts of each to maintain an existence are alike.

The situation on board ship in Roderick Random, chapters XXI-XXX is much like that of David, in Kidnapped chapters VII and VIII, and that of the Master and colonel Burke in The Master of Ballantrae, pages 45--58. There is the same brutality among the crew, with walking of planks and threats from such men as Teach and Mackshane constantly endangering the lives of the helpless prisoners. The difference is that in Stevenson these things are more artistic. They make us shiver without

exciting and a disagreeable sense of disgust.

In St Ives, page 9 the raptures of St Ives over Flora, and the rapidity with which his feeling grows is more after the fashion of the gushing passion of lovers in the eighteenth century than our more reasonable modern sort. It is especially suggestive of the love of Roderick Random for Narcissa, (Roderick Random page 245-a 253).

The barbarous duel in the second chapter of St. Ives has a decided eighteenth century flavor as has also the escape from prison, page 62. Throughout this book occur unexpected predicaments, sometimes half amusing and half shocking, which are strongly suggestive of Smollett and Fielding. Instances are, the appearance of the aunt in the dining room (page 44-85) the circumstance at the inn

(page 18 e) and the adventures of the runaway couple (page 24 e). But Stevenson's situations are always lacking in the coarseness which is so common in Smollett and Fielding.

In Treasure Island the voice of Ben Gunn frightening the gold searchers (page 240) suggests the passage where Robinson Crusoe is frightened by the voice of the parrot (page 76) and the lonely horror of the discovery of the footprint (Robinson Crusoe page 79) is reproduced when Jim Hawkins discovers Ben Gunn page 110 & 1, and where the skeleton is found page 241. The footprint incident is the most picturesque thing in Defoe and it gives a thrill of pure, peculiar horror which is very similar to the thrills Stevenson is so fond of inducing.

The manner of working upon the imagination in the journal of the Plague (pages 46, 48,

~~2~~, ~~7~~, & ~~73~~) very faintly anticipates the horror of the cries which jim hears on Treasure Island (page 96) and the face of Ransom as he is carried below. (Kidnapped page 57)

The beginning of Kidnapped is not unlike the beginning of Captain Singleton, and I believe that David Balfour partakes somewhat of the adventurousness of Captain Singleton with also some of the sense and Quakerishness of William.

Leslie Stephen says that the great virtue of Defoe's work is that his lies seem so probable. Stevenson evidently admired this quality in Defoe and studied his method of producing it. for we find that he has used similar means for securing verisimilitude in his own stories, though to be sure he is always more artful. While

Defoe used the device of a mere chain of evidence and assertion of the good character of his witnesses to make his stories seem reliable, Stevenson uses more complex means. In Treasure Island he has the hero who tells the story say that he was asked to do so by other participants in the adventure and makes him go on to explain their desire that he should keep back the location of the island (Treasure Island page 1). In Kidnapped he invests his hero with such honesty and straightforwardness that we are obliged to believe the story he tells.

Another method which Defoe uses to secure verisimilitude is minuteness of detail and cataloguing. He often enumerates lists of articles, and at other times he gives facts not especially important to the story but which

are of such a nature as the casual narrator of actual events would be likely to mention. Stevenson is too conscientious to do just this. He seldom enumerates, though at times, when he is certain that the catalog will be interesting, he does it (Treasure Island page 31), but oftener he rather gives the effect of detail through suggestion as for instance in Treasure Island page 258 in telling about Ben Gunn's cave; I felt after reading the book that this cave had been minutely described, I could seem to see it and its contents distinctly, but when I turned back to the passage I found that only a few details were mentioned. Sometimes Stevenson allows his speaker to tell a longer story than is necessary to the plot, in order that the narrative may seem more real, for example

Kidnapped, (page 5-3) the story of the sailor

Stevenson seems to have chosen to go back to Defoe in the matter of omitting character development. In so is the exception of his time in that he makes almost no attempt at weaving character growth into his plots, and like Defoe, too, he depends almost entirely upon the effectiveness of incident for the interest of his stories. J. A. MacCulloch (Living Age, 218; 5-40) notes this fact and compares Robinson Crusoe with Treasure Island in this respect.

Like the early novelists Stevenson seldom appeals to the visual sense. In his Letters V II page 377 he says,

"My two aims may be described as

1st War to the adjective,
2nd Death to the optic nerve.

Admitted we live in an age of

the of the nerve in literature For how many centuries did literature git along without a sign of it"

We recognize a touch of the last century in Stevensons idioms and forms of speech. Andrew Lang speaks of Stevensons sense of the English idiom of the last century. He, (Stevenson) also has a skilful trick of introducing terms which have a peculiar buccaneering, piratical flavor, as in Treasure Island, where he has made "piece of eight" and the "dead mans chest" the very keynotes of the story.

I believe that Stevenson was only partially conscious of the resemblance which his work bears to that of the eighteenth century. Much of the eighteenth century element in his work is merely the natural and

involuntary result of the reading which he did at his most impressionable age Charles D. Lanier tells how, when, as a boy Stevenson accompanied his father on his coasting expedition along the north shore and about Skerryvore lighthouse he was poring over Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, Poe, Cooper and Defoe. I think he shows that he absorbed much from all of these. I believe that his work bears a closer relation to that of Scott than any other author's and my investigation has led me to think that he may owe more to him than to any other novelist The adventures of the staircase (Kidnapped page 27) is wonderfully like Scott if not actually suggested by his description of the death of Amy Robsart. The incidents and characters of The Black Arrow seem to have been taken

right out of Scott Indeed I have never read a novel of Stevenson but I was reminded of Scott, while Stevenson makes such frequent reference to him in his letters that it is evident he recognized that he owed a great deal to him.

From the study of Irving Stevenson may well have learned to desire beauty of style and to aspire to that adaptation of tone to subject matter which he has so successfully attained, while Tales of a Traveler had a pronounced influence upon one of his plots as he himself acknowledges in the introduction to Treasure Island. I shall quote the passage later. Some of his short stories and Dr Jekyl and Mr Hyde have a tone of weird horror which might have been suggested by Poe, and the finding of the treasure

in Treasure Island (Chapters XXXI and XXXII), the part which the skeleton plays, etc, remind us forcibly of The Gold Bug. From Poe Stevenson may well have got some points for the wanderings of The Master in the american wilderness (The Master of Ballantrae, page 279) as well as for his sea tales.

Stevenson himself speaks of his indebtedness to Charles Kingsley, from whose "At Last" he got the idea of "The Dead Man's Chest" which was the clue to Treasure Island, and to Captain Johnson's "History of Notorious Pirates" which was a help and inspiration to him in his seafaring Tales.

All Stevenson owes to the novelists mentioned above is only surer proof of his debt to the early eighteenth century novelists, for, with the possible exception of Irving, every one of these

writers is a disciple of Defoe, Smollett and Fielding, and from them Stevenson naturally drew more of the eighteenth century spirit.

As I have already said, I believe that Stevenson was not altogether conscious of the influence which these authors had upon him. I think it was in a large degree merely the result of having read them so much at an age when his mind was very sensitive to impressions, so that his ideas of fiction were greatly influenced by them and resemblances inevitably occur in his own work. A quotation from his introduction to Treasure Island page XIV may serve to explain how this was:

"It is my debt to Washington Irving that exercises my conscience, and justly so, for I believe plagiarism was rarely carried

farther. I chanced to pick up the "Tales of a Traveller" some years ago, with a view to an anthology of prose narrative, and the book flew up and struck me: Billy Bones, his chest, the company in the parlour, the whole inner spirit and a good deal of the material detail of my first chapters all were there, all were the property of Washington Irving. But I had no guess of it then as I sat writing by the fireside, in what seemed the springtides of a somewhat prudential inspiration; nor yet day by day, after lunch as I read aloud my morning's work to the family. It seemed to me original as sin; it seemed to belong to me like my own right eye."

Sometimes, I think, Stevenson did deliberately borrow ideas. He acknowledges in the passage we have already quoted from the

introduction to Treasure Island, that "the "parrot" once belonged to Robinson Crusoe" and that the skeleton was taken from Poe. But he is a good illustration of Coleridge's statement, "To admire on principle is to imitate without loss of originality." When he sees something which he believes he can use to good advantage he assimilates it and builds it into the organic structure of his work in such a way that it is often really his in a far truer sense than it was ever the original author's. Sidney Colvin puts it this way.

"He may set out to tell a pirate story for boys "exactly in the ancient way," and it will come from him not in the ancient way at all but reminted, marked with a sharpness and saliency in the characters, a pungent stamp of buccaneering.

ferocity combined with smiling humor, an energy of vision, and happy vividness of presentment which are alwingly his own." Letters V I page XXII

It was in this way that Shakespeare used his many sources.

Stevenson himself thoroughly believed in the right of every author to borrow whatever he could make worthy use of In the Introduction to Treasure Island again, page XIV he says in speaking of the borrowed parrot and skeleton.

"I think little of these they are trifles and details, and no man can hope to have a monopoly of skeletons or make a corner in talking birds. —— These useful writers had fulfilled the poets saying; despairing they had left behind them

"Footprints on the sands of time,

Footprints that perhaps another and I was the other."

Stevenson is not less generous to others than to himself. At one time he in someway suggested that a story of a certain writer bore some resemblance to one of his own and a hungry editor immediatly picked up the choice bit and turned it into an article convicting the author of this story of plagiarism. S. was bitterly indignant and at once wrote to the editor. The following is an extract from the letter.

"as if I did not borrow the ideas of half of my own (stories). as if any one who had written a story ill had a right to complain of any other who should have written it better."

Letters VI page 293.

Our conclusion then

must be that few authors have been more largely indebted to those who went before than Robert Louis Stevenson, and that he is especially indebted to the authors of the earliest novels of incident, i.e. Defoe and Smollett. But we are persuaded that his is not the debt of the unworthy dependent, but rather that of the child to the parent; the natural debt of blood and bone, paid already because it is essential to the perpetuation of the parent's life.

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